undertow by beansie

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: M/M
Language: English
Characters: Mike Wheeler, Will Byers
Relationships: Will Byers/Mike Wheeler
Status: Completed
Published: 2018-02-09
Updated: 2018-03-01
Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:15:35
Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply
Chapters: 2
Words: 11,889
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

Will has never had his first kiss. Mike is happy to lend a hand.

1. cleric

Notes for the Chapter:

> this was supposed to be a cute fluff piece. i don't know what happened don't @ me

It would really be a shame if, after everything, Will died here in the Wheeler basement, sprawled out on a pile of blankets and mismatched pillows. He's survived a week in a literal hellhole, fought off being possessed by an actual demon monster, and he's going to be taken out by his own mortification. He can see the headlines now: *Local Zombie Boy dies of Embarrassment, but For Real This Time*.

"Not anyone? Like, at all?"

Will's face has probably never been redder than in this very moment, which is a significant feat for someone who's spent most his life in perpetual humiliation. He grabs the nearest pillow, one that Mike pulled off of his living room couch, and buries his face in it. "Mike." He tries to make it sound stern, but it just comes out muffled and whiny.

"Okay, but I'm just saying. No one? At all? What about Hannah? After the Snow Ball?"

"*No*," Will groans from beneath his pillow cocoon. Maybe if he stays under long enough, he could suffocate and pass out instead of continuing this conversation. It's something to consider.

"Are you kidding? She didn't even try to kiss you? That's rude." Mike, who apparently could not take a hint to save his life (or Will's life, at this point), trudges forward with his train of thought. How they had even gotten to this topic of conversation was beyond him, but Will had made the unfortunate mistake of admitting that he'd never had his first kiss, and Mike seemed to have taken personal offense to it.

"Yeah," he says, trying to make his voice sound uninterested instead of mortified. It seems to work, because a discomforting silence falls over them instead. Will tentatively removes the pillow from his face.

They lie there, side by side, until Mike asks in a quieter, more thoughtful voice, “You didn't try to kiss her?”

Will huffs. “No, Mike, I didn't try to kiss her.”

“Oh.” Another silence. “How come?”

The gate’s closed, he knows it is, but it doesn’t stop Will from wondering for a moment if the Mind Flayer might still be able to reach him. He could flit into the Upside Down real quick, maybe call him up – *Hey, Mr. Almighty Demon Guy, can you come possess me and try to destroy my town again? I know it’s inconvenient for you, you’ve probably got plans, but I’m having the most mortifying conversation of my life, so if you could do me a solid here, I’d really appreciate it.*

Eternal destruction of the entirety of Hawkins or embarrass himself in front of Mike? It’s a tough call.

It's worse, though, because Mike is usually so good at reading him, and so rarely pushes him into talking about things he was uncomfortable with. On any normal day, he'd pat Will on the shoulder and tell him he'd be here if he ever wanted to talk about it. Will’s never actually had to tell Mike no before. He’s not sure he knows how.

“I don't know,” Will answers after a long moment, which is a blatant lie, and he doesn't make a habit of lying to Mike very often. The truth is that there are too many reasons, that he had barely spoken to Hannah before that night, that she'd called him Zombie Boy and it was probably supposed to be cute but it just stung, that she was taller than him and he wasn't sure how to even approach that, that he'd never kissed anyone before and didn't want to try in front of his entire class on a sweaty gym floor, that Hannah had probably only asked him to dance out of pity and not because she wanted him to kiss her. That he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to be kissing girls, anyway.

He doesn't let that thought go any further.

“You don't have to worry about it,” Mike says, shifting beside him. “I know Dustin and Lucas can be assholes sometimes, but I won't tell

them, okay?" Will smiles, a genuine little thing despite how strung out he felt, because *that* was the Mike he knew. Lucas and Dustin were never really mean, and he knows they wouldn't make fun of him if it really upset him, but Mike going out of his way to protect him anyway makes his chest burn in a familiar happiness.

"Thanks," Will says, hugging the pillow to his chest. "It's just...she's taller than me, you know?"

Mike bursts out laughing, and Will can't help grinning back. "So what?"

"So, it's weird, right? I don't know. I didn't want my first kiss to be with a girl I barely know and not even be able to reach her. I'm sure it'd be terrible."

"My first kiss was kinda terrible," Mike admits, and Will can feel him shrug.

"Yeah?" He's never talked about it, not really. Will knew it happened while he was missing. He wasn't sure he wanted to know much else.

"Yeah," Mike says with a short chuckle. "I was trying to ask El to the Snow Ball while also asking her to move in with us. But El didn't know what a dance was, and Dustin kept yelling about chocolate pudding, and then I just...went for it. I almost missed and it lasted for two seconds." Will, because he's a good friend, tries very hard not to burst out laughing. He does not succeed. Mike turns his head to scowl at him. "Oh, I'm so glad my traumatic first time story is amusing to you!" he says, shoving Will's shoulder with a half-quashed grin.

Will only manages to laugh harder. "You asked her to move in with you before you kissed?" he teases. "Moving pretty fast there, huh, Wheeler?"

"She needed a place to live! She practically already did live with us! I was being *chivalrous*," Mike huffs in the way he does when they're playing D&D and completely ignoring the plot line he created to do their own thing, when he's trying to act madder than he actually is. It's so familiar that it's almost endearing.

“You mean desperate?” Will asks, blinking innocently, his mouth mashed together so that he doesn't smile.

Mike stares at him, open mouthed. Will lasts a whopping four seconds before he breaks and bursts into giggles. “Wow. *Wow*.” Mike shakes his head. “Here I am, inviting you into my home, telling you an embarrassing story to make you feel better, and this is how you treat me. Unbelievable.”

Will rolls his eyes exaggeratedly, because he knows Mike isn’t mad. He and El broke up amicably, and even though it was a sore spot for a short time, they both quickly slipped back into being good friends. Besides, it's nice that they're joking like this again. It's taken all of them awhile, after everything they’ve been through, but every now and then they manage to flit back into moments of normalcy, where they can laugh and hang out and make fun of each other without worrying about a shadow looming over them. Sometimes, Will even feels like a regular teenager. It's almost comforting.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I'm sure my first kiss is gonna be worse. I'll be too nervous and mess it up, somehow.” He pauses for a moment, considering, his hands fidgeting with nothing. “I'll probably be so nervous that I just puke on them. That's romantic, right?”

Mike chuckles, but he's staring intently at Will, propped up on an elbow. “You don't need to be nervous. There's nothing...scary or anything. It's not hard.”

It's meant to be encouraging, he knows it is, and he tries his best to take it in the spirit it was given. Still, it doesn't stop Will from muttering, “Easy for someone that's already been kissed to say.”

“It's not! It's really not bad at all, I promise.” Mike's still looking at him, earnest and intense and focused, and Will feels transparent under his gaze. “I bet you'll be good at it, even.”

Will scoffs. “Yeah, who wouldn't want to be covered in vomit while they make out with Zombie Boy?”

“Don't—” Mike starts, but he pauses, frowning. “Don't make out with

people that call you Zombie Boy, then," he finishes in a quieter voice.

Will decides not to point out that Mike had been insinuating that he should have made out with Hannah less than ten minutes ago. "No problem, that narrows down my options from zero to negative forty."

"Hey," Mike says, soft, in the voice he usually reserves just for Will. "You gotta relax. It's just a kiss. Don't make it into something it's not. I'm sure there's plenty of people that want to kiss you." Will shrugs, noncommittal, so he doesn't have to answer. Mike is still staring at him, and Will shifts a little under his gaze, choosing to stare back at the ceiling. He briefly considers hiding under the pillow again.

Another moment passes, a bit too long to be natural, and Mike inhales sharply, as though he's worked himself up to this. "Here, I can help you," he says, his tongue stumbling over the words a bit.

"What?" Will says, whipping his head back to face him.

"I'll, uh—I can." Will stares blankly at him as he searches for the words. "I can show you how to kiss." There's a long beat, during which Mike seems to find his footing, and he pushes on. "I'll kiss you, so you know how to do it. Then you won't be nervous the next time you kiss someone."

Will blinks once, twice, trying to figure out if Mike had said what he thought he said or if this was some elaborate fever dream that would end with the Demogorgon having a tea party with Steve and Jonathan, like his last one had. It seemed more likely than Mike asking to kiss him, at any rate. "I, um. *What*?"

"O-only of you want to!" Mike says quickly, backtracking. "I was just thinking, you wouldn't have to be nervous if you were kissing me, right? Because who cares, right? Then when you actually wanna kiss someone, you'll know what you're doing, and you won't be nervous anymore. Right?"

"Oh," Will says, voice small, desperately forcing himself not to think about who he would *actually wanna kiss*. "Yeah, that...that makes sense." It did, sort of, as long as you didn't consider that kissing Mike

was probably more nerve wracking than kissing a thousand girls. But Will wasn't about to bring that up.

“Yeah?” Mike asks, a little breathless. “You'll let me?”

Will takes a moment before nodding, slowly and deliberately. He can't think too hard about this, he *can't*, so he doesn't. “Yeah,” he says instead. He doesn't know when his throat got so dry.

“Okay.” Mike's nodding too, though his is absentminded, like he just needs to fidget. “C'mere,” he says, his voice low, and Will's gut twists in a way that terrifies him. But it's Mike, and he can't say no to Mike, so he wiggles closer and blinks up at him, waiting. “Okay, it’s good to start out slow. Just like, hold her hand or touch her face or something.” Mike leans forward and places a hand on his jaw, running his thumb gently across his cheekbone. “Just so she knows you're coming in, right?”

“Right,” Will says, nodding again, but he's pretty sure Mike could've said *punch her in the gut, Will, that's a huge turn on, girls love it* and he would have agreed.

Mike's other hand shoots out, grabbing at his waist and pulling him in even closer, but just short of being flush up against each other. He leans in, a few inches from touching foreheads, and moves his thumb across Will's mouth. “Part your lips,” he says, his voice dropping, and Will is absolutely certain he's going to explode right there.

Mike must see the tension, because he smiles just a little. “Relax. Close your eyes,” he murmurs, breath ghosting against Will's mouth. His eyes flutter shut without any input on Will's part, because he's not in control of this anymore. He never was.

He has to stop this. He knows he has to stop this, because his heart is going to burst right out of his chest if Mike gets any closer. He has to stop this because he can feel Mike's thumb burning a hole into the corner of his mouth, and it's going to catch a blaze if it's there any longer. He has to stop this because he desperately does not want to stop it.

He doesn't stop it.

Mike's voice is just barely a whisper, throaty and raw and so close. “Then you just lean in.” And his eyes are closed but he follows Mike's guiding hand, ignores his thundering heart, and kisses Mike.

It's a slow, steady flame that starts in his chest, spreading throughout his body, warming him to his toes. Mike's lips are burning, a little chapped, slightly off center from the angle they're at, and Will can feel himself melting into them. He flings his hands out, desperate for something to hold onto, and buries them in Mike's shirt.

Mike is soft and solid, strong but not insistent against his lips. He shifts them slightly, just enough to fix their alignment, and it makes Will's every nerve alight. He's so far gone. It'd be laughable if it wasn't terrifying.

Mike pulls away, slowly, just a little, and Will opens his eyes to see him leaning back in, and he resolves to be ready. When their lips meet, he closes his eyes again, and he tightens his grip on Mike's shirt, pulling him in, pulling himself up into the kiss. He feels Mike's hand on his waist twitch, like he was about to hold on tighter before stopping himself.

All too soon, Mike pulls away again, and does not attempt to lean back in. Will blinks at him, not daring to move, choosing instead to focus on the labored rise and fall of Mike's chest underneath his fists. The hand on Will's waist twitches again, too forceful to be accidental, brushing roughly over his skin.

“See?” Mike says after they've laid there for an entire lifetime. “Just like that. It's easy.” His voice sounds stretched, thin and breathless and unbearably attractive. Will, to put it simply, is screwed. How is he supposed to go back to being friends with Mike when he knows what his lips feel like against his own, what his eyes look like that close and wide, what his breaths sound like after just a short little kiss? Mike pulls his hands back, turning his body just the slightest, and Will slowly lets his fists unravel from his shirt.

“That's it?” he asks, because it was so easy, so short and soft and simple. He was expecting something...more. Maybe something more frightening or more intimidating or more complicated.

Or maybe he just wanted to kiss Mike more.

“I-I mean, yeah, that's kissing.” Mike scrambles for the right words. “Did you...I mean.” He clears his throat, and Will catches the way his eyes glance off. “Did you, uh, not...like it?”

“No!” Will is quick to correct. “No, it's just that, um...I don't know. It's just so much more...I don't know.” He sighs, feeling frustrated with himself, and takes a moment before trying again. “I think I just thought it'd be harder. You were right. It was too easy.”

Mike laughs, and Will is suddenly so fiercely grateful they're friends. He grins back, all at once comfortable, the awkwardness of the moment dissipating. “I told you! I knew you'd be good at it. I mean, there's, like, other kissing too, like with tongue and everything, but, uh...yeah.” He falters off at the end, but he's still smiling down at Will, soft and kind and comforting. Will's heart feels like it's going to burst.

There's a voice somewhere in Will's head screaming at him to let it end, to roll over and go to sleep and never ever mention it again. He very deliberately ignores that voice. “Yeah?” he asks, blinking up at him. It's a safe choice. It could be interpreted plenty of different ways. If Mike isn't thinking the same thing he is, well—

“Yeah,” Mike says, swallowing thickly. He's looking so carefully at Will, so laser-focused and intense. “I could...I could keep going. Show you that, too.” There's a long, heavy pause. “If you wanted me to.”

Perhaps he's so desperate to hear it that he doesn't actually expect Mike to agree, to actually want to keep kissing him. It takes him a few moments to remember that he has to answer; as though years of longing wasn't enough of a response. “I—” he nods. “Okay.” His voice is so low, barely a whisper.

Mike moves so suddenly that Will almost misses it happening, and he finds him half hovering over him, one hand on either side of his head. He looks a little frenzied, like he's afraid he might lose his nerve, or that Will might change his mind. Still, he stops and looks down at Will for a long moment. “Ready?”

Will has never been less ready for anything in his life. He nods.

Mike leans in without any more preamble, placing his lips on Will's as chastely as before. They stay together for a moment, silent and still, until Mike finally runs a tentative tongue along Will's bottom lip. Will opens his mouth and Mike surges forward, slotting a knee between his legs and lowering himself down over top of him.

Will doesn't really know what he's doing, because Mike isn't explicitly telling him, but he's surprised to find that he's not really nervous. He lets Mike lead, lets him gently push him further, lets him nip at his lower lip, lets him fist his hands in his hair, lets him break him.

That's what this is, isn't it? A slow form of torture, one that's all the more painful because of how pleasurable it is. It's one thing to have a crush on your straight best friend, to pine from a distance and maybe think about it on dark nights, alone in your room where no one can find you. It's another to know exactly what his body feels like on top of yours, what his hands feel like in your hair, what his tongue feels like against your own, and to know you'll never feel it again.

Because kissing Mike is the first breath he took coming back from the Upside Down. Kissing Mike is the sun on his face during summer bike rides, it's hearing his favorite song on the radio, it's beating the high score on Galaga in the arcade after weeks of trying, it's rolling a fourteen and killing the Thessalhydra at the end of a campaign. It's kissing Mike. It's coming home.

This will break him.

He's never going to be able to be his friend after this, he will never be able to go back, to pretend to be normal again. Will reaches up, wrapping his hands around the back of Mike's neck. Mike takes it as the invitation it is and lays his body weight on Will, their chests finally touching. Will heaves a short, gasping breath and makes the mistake of looking into Mike's eyes.

Will's not blind; he's seen the way Mike looks at him, a mixture of pity and adoration, the same way he looks at Mrs. Upton's puppy when he trips over his own feet. It's the way he probably looks at Holly, too. Like a little sibling. Like a friend.

Not like the way he's looking at Will now.

Mike's eyes are wide, dark and blown and staring at Will with a kind of intensity he's never seen in them. He looks hungry, insatiable. He looks like he *wants*. He looks like he wants Will.

His stomach swoops in the strangest way, and in a rush of confidence, it's Will who surges up to meet his lips, suddenly eager. If this was all going to end soon, fine. He would make the most of it while he could. He runs his hands along the back of Mike's neck, just lightly skimming through his hair, and he can feel the shudder that storms through his body.

They're so caught up in each other that they almost don't hear the footsteps coming towards the basement. It's just as the doorknob is turning that Mike shoots up, quickly rolling off of Will and wrapping himself back in his blanket. There's nearly three feet between them when Mike's mom opens the door and the light from the kitchen floods in.

“Boys, are you still awake?” she says, her voice a carrying whisper.

There's a long pause, broken only by their muffled breaths, before Mike responds. “Yeah, Mom?”

“I just got off the phone with your mother, Will. She says Jonathan's gonna come pick you up tomorrow at ten. Okay?”

“Okay!” Will replies, trying his best to keep his voice even. “Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler.”

“I'm going to bed. You boys need anything else?”

“No, Mom, we're good. Good night.” Mike says, sounding a little more snappish than he probably meant.

“Good night,” Will chimed.

“Good night, boys. Sleep tight.” The light returns to the sliver underneath the door, and Will is left with a heaving chest and too many thoughts to handle.

They both lay side by side, staring at the ceiling. He waits for Mike to say something, desperate for him to. He started all of this, and Will pleads that he finds it in him to make a joke, to make it easy. Anything to break the tension, anything to calm his nerves, anything to reassure him that this hasn't ruined their entire friendship.

Mike says nothing. Will's hands burn where he touched him. He does not make the mistake of looking into Mike's eyes again.

A few minutes pass, enough that the silence becomes unnatural. Will stifles a sigh and rolls onto his side, suddenly exhausted. He feels Mike shift beside him, and can feel his eyes on his back.

He contemplates for a moment before finally speaking. "Well, good night, Mike." It comes out smaller than he meant it to.

It's just a kiss.

"'Night, Will." His voice is strained. Will refuses to think about why.

Don't make it into something it's not.

Sleep takes him quietly, and he doesn't protest.

Notes for the Chapter:

> um. this wasn't supposed to be angsty. i kinda feel like i need to fix this with a part two. this is not what i wanted
>
> you can come yell at me on tumblr at byeler

2. paladin

Notes for the Chapter:

> quick warning: this chapter contains some mild internalized homophobia, casual, period-typical biphobia, and use of the q slur. nothing extreme, but please take note if reading any of those makes you uncomfortable
>
> anyway, part two is dedicated to everyone that threatened me with bodily harm if i didn't update with a fluffy ending. i do it for my fans.

Mike Wheeler may only be sixteen years old, but he's proud to say he knows a lot of things. He knows all fifty states and their capitals, and almost all forty-one presidents. He knows the exact distance between the Earth and the sun, 92.96 million miles, a fact that clings to his memory from their sixth grade science fair project. He knows the unit circle like the back of his hand, as much as he wishes he could forget it. He knows the secret cheat to get the enemies in Galaga to stop firing at you, even though he won't tell Dustin, no matter how much he begs. He knows where to get the best pizza in all of Hawkins, Indiana, which is significantly less impressive when considering that there are only three pizza joints in the entire town. He knows that no matter how long Nancy's away at school, she knows exactly how much money she has in her room at any given time, and if he takes any, he'll be paying it back with interest. He knows that, like every healthy sixteen-year-old boy, he should want to kiss girls. He knows that he does want to kiss girls.

He also knows that he wants to kiss Will Byers.

Which, okay, shouldn't be that big of a deal. So what? It's the *eighties*, for christssake. Gay people exist, and besides, it's not a problem, because Mike knows he's not gay. He wants to kiss girls. He *likes* to kiss girls. Sure, he's only kissed one girl so far, and more aren't exactly lining up down the block, but he knows, given the opportunity, he'd enjoy himself.

And Mike knows that to enjoy kissing girls is pretty much the opposite of being gay, no matter what ugly words Troy might throw at him, so Mike knows he's not gay.

Except sometimes he catches himself staring at Will just a little too long, watching the way his eyes light up when he laughs, or the way his hands curl around a piece of charcoal during art, or the furrow in his brow when they work on homework together. He doesn't mean to, it's just that Will is really nice to look at. It's an objective fact. People like to look at flowers, they like to look at sunsets, and they like to look at Will Byers. It's human nature.

And honestly, Will's *pretty*, which is probably the root of all this. Mike likes girls, and girls are pretty, but Will is also pretty, so maybe Mike's brain is a little confused. But it's not a big deal. So what if he can’t stop thinking about the way Will's doe eyes light up like stars while he talks about his ideas for the next campaign? So what if he finds himself daydreaming about Will's lips, about what they'd feel like against his own, against his neck—

Mike knows it's completely natural. And Mike knows he's not gay.

That's why he asks Will to kiss him.

Mike knows he has to be careful whenever he asks Will to do anything, because he has a bad habit of doing whatever he's asked, whether he wants to or not. Will seems to struggle with the concept of *optional*, and that he's more than capable of saying no if he doesn't want to do something. He's gotten a little better, now that they're older, but it's still a work in progress. And Mike never wants Will to feel pressured, so he has to be very cautious about his phrasing.

When he finds out that Will's never even been kissed before, everything seems to work itself out. Will can have his first kiss with someone who won't make him nervous, and Mike can get this weird urge to kiss Will out of his system. It's a win-win situation. Once they kiss, it'll help Mike's brain remember that Will's not a girl, and that Mike likes kissing girls, and the funny feeling in his stomach whenever he sees Will smile will go away. Problem solved. Easy-peasy.

Except that's not what happens at all.

Mike kisses Will and suddenly everything is on fire, a furious blaze that ignites the second their lips touch. And, okay, it's been a while since he's kissed someone, he's probably just a little overexcited. He knows he likes kissing, and it's just that he's missed the feeling. That's all. No need to be dramatic. So he readjusts and goes to kiss Will once more, slow and easy, ready for the whole thing to work itself out. He's not ready for the urge to pull Will flush against his chest, to run his hands through his hair and push him into the pillow and kiss him until their lips are raw.

He stops himself, somehow. He's actually very proud of how well he's doing. It's not exactly going the way he expected it to, but he’s doing a pretty good job of rolling with the punches. He's not freaking out, and he's not trying to force his tongue down Will's throat. His chest is heaving, and he's definitely going to have a full-blown anxiety attack later, but all in all, better than he could've hoped for.

He's talking, but he's not exactly sure what he's saying, just something to fill the silence, since he knows Will won't. He's barely even aware of what's going on until he's looking into Will's big eyes, watching the way his mouth forms around the word “Yeah?” like he's waiting for something. Hoping for something. It hits him that he'd just brought up *kissing with tongue*.

He's fucked.

“Yeah,” he murmurs, voice low. The next words leave his mouth with absolutely no permission from his brain to do so. “I could…I could keep going. Show you that, too.” He pauses, but remembers he has to give Will an out. He has to give him an opportunity to say no. He doesn't want Will agreeing just because he feels like he has to. “If you wanted me to.”

Will, apparently, wants him to, because the next thing he knows he's overtop of Will, begging for permission, trying his hardest to keep control of himself (because if he starts, he’s not going to stop. He’s *not going to stop*). He manages, just for a moment, to take it slow. Will's new at this, and he doesn't want to freak him out. He's just showing him how kissing is supposed to work, that's all. Mike knows

this isn't real.

But then Will opens his mouth for him and every rational thought he's ever had is out the window and the only thing on his mind is kissing Will senseless. So he does. So he lets himself melt into Will and he doesn't once think about how much he enjoys it.

And maybe it's a good thing his mom interrupts when she does, because he's really not sure what else could have reached him in that moment. He's pretty sure he could've spent the rest of his life happily kissing Will.

Mike knows he likes kissing girls. And now he knows he likes kissing Will.

And now? Now it's a problem.

They eat breakfast the next morning in relative silence, and when his mom mentions it, he just mutters that they were up late. Jonathan, who's visiting for the weekend, comes almost exactly at ten. Mike smiles and gives Will a strained goodbye.

And then he freaks out.

Mike likes girls. He does, he knows he does. He likes their long hair and their soft lips, likes the way their legs look in skirts during the summer and the way their little giggles ring in his head all day. He likes the way Sarah Grady's eyebrows quirk when she asks a question in math and he likes the way El smiles when she figures out a joke all on her own and he likes the way Stacy Benson's long eyelashes curl against her cheeks when she rests her eyes for a long moment during 6th period.

Will has long eyelashes, too.

Which is a stupid thing to think about, because so what? So what if Will's eyelashes are long or his lips are soft? Whatever. It doesn't mean anything. Just like it doesn't mean anything that he can appreciate Adam Taylor's incredible abs when they're changing for gym, *not* that he's looking. Their lockers are close to each other,

that’s all. Besides, even Lucas has commented on that, because his abs are just incredible. It’s just an objective, platonic fact. And it doesn’t mean anything that sometimes when they all watch movies together, he and Will end up next to each other on a cramped couch, and Mike can’t focus on anything besides the fact that Will is pressed up against his side, snuggled into him, warm and safe and comforting. And it definitely doesn’t mean anything that he can’t stop thinking about the feeling of Will’s mouth on his own, because he’s probably just kiss starved or whatever. It had been a while since he kissed someone. That’s all it is. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t mean anything.

Mike paces for a solid two hours, reaching no conclusion whatsoever. He does, however, successfully chew through his lip until it starts to bleed. So he has that going for him, at least.

He throws himself onto his bed, ready to admit defeat, and grabs for the first book he can find. Anything is better than thinking about this...*situation* anymore.

He manages to distract himself with varying degrees of success until Monday, when he has to return to school and, more notably, face Will. Mike knows it's going to be awkward. He's sure he hurt Will's feelings by almost blatantly ignoring him after they made out, and one of his personal goals in life is to make sure Will gets hurt as little as possible, so step one is going to be making sure that Will's okay. Step two is figuring out his identity crisis, solving how to stop it, and then actually doing it. Maybe he should add a step one-point-five: pray for a miracle.

Mike's the last to arrive at their spot by the bike racks, and he can see the smile slide from Will's face as he approaches. Okay. Understandable. Will's probably just worried, because they left things a little tense. The fact that Mike's heart is clenching is completely unrelated.

He greets the rest of the Party, but waits until the bell rings to address Will directly. They don't have the same first period, but both their classes are on the other side of school, so they usually walk together.

“Hey, Will,” Mike says, smiling brightly, just like he would if this was a normal day. Because this is a normal day. He's just a normal kid who isn't having a crisis over the fact that he thoroughly enjoyed kissing his best friend.

“Hi,” Will squeaks, looking a little wary, like he's not quite sure what Mike might do. Which is fair, considering Mike also has absolutely no idea what he's going to do.

Mike blinks, realizing that he's worked himself up to this conversation without actually once thinking about what he's going to say. “Uh,” he scrambles, and finally settles on, “how's Jonathan?”

“Oh!” Will looks as startled as Mike feels about the topic. “Um, he's good.”

“Good,” Mike says. He's not sure where his brain is this morning, because he can't think of anything else to say.

“Yeah,” Will replies. He waits a few beats, probably to see if Mike would say anything, but his mouth takes that moment to decide it isn't going to form coherent sounds anymore, so that's out of the question. “It was good to see him.”

“Hey, we're okay, right?” And, wow, okay, he definitely didn't mean for that to come out, but it did, and now this conversation is going to happen. So.

Will stares at him, wide-eyed. “Yeah. 'Course.”

“Okay, good, 'cause I know things got a little weird the other night, and I just wanted to make sure we were cool. 'Cause you're one of my best friends, and, I don't know, when you left, it felt weird. And I just don't want it to be weird or anything. So, um. Yeah.” Oh, so that's where his brain was. It'd been working up to that speech, which Mike gave without actually registering or comprehending any of the words.

“Yeah, Mike, we're cool.” Will gives him a small smile that looks nothing like his real one.

“Yeah? You're not mad at me?”

Will's expression turns bewildered. “What? No. Why would I be mad at you?” Mike shrugged, confused as Will looked. Why did Will think he knew anything? He had absolutely no clue what was going on, at all. “Are you mad at *me*?” Will asks, his voice getting quiet the way it does when he's nervous.

“What? No. Of course not,” Mike reassures him. “So, we're both good, right? No one's mad at anyone?” He can't help smiling down at Will.

“Right.” Will smiles back, and it's closer to genuine this time. “We should get to class. I'll see you at lunch.”

He watches Will leave before turning into his own classroom. That went well, he supposes. They were good. They weren't mad. They both said it.

It's not right. It sits uneasily in his stomach, but he lets it be as he slides into his desk. There's more pressing matters to attend to, like the chem quiz he forgot about until this very second, and the fact that he couldn't stop staring at Will's lips the entire conversation.

Two weeks go by before it becomes unbearable. Mike and Will are *fine*, if *fine* means they act totally normal in the group, but as soon as they’re alone, they become uncomfortable, blushing, awkward messes that can’t remember how words work. So, yeah, they’re fine. They’re good.

Mike can’t stand it, because Will used to be the easiest person to talk to. Will is a great listener; it’s one of his best traits, and definitely one of the reasons they’re such good friends. Mike could burst into his room and bring up whatever topic he wanted, and Will would just drop what he was doing and lean in with a smile, listening peacefully for as long as he wanted to talk.

That’s not to say that Will can’t talk Mike’s ear off when he wants to, because when he gets going, there’s sometimes no stopping him. It takes a while, most days, for him to find a topic he’s comfortable with, but from there, he goes a mile a minute, rambling about a new band Jonathan made him a tape of or the technique he just learned in art class. Mike loves those moments especially, because he knows not

everyone gets to see them. The kids in their classes aren't ever going to get to see the way his grin spreads across his entire face when he talks about the painting he's doing for Joyce's birthday and Keith from the arcade won't ever get to look at the crease in his brow when he talks through a difficult trig problem and Lonnie, that piece of shit, will never again get to see the way Will's eyes sparkle at Christmas time, taking in the lights and the decorations and the indescribable holiday feeling. Only Mike and the rest of the Party ever really get to see him like that, and it's incredible, because Will is so bright and lively and dynamic. He's so caring and kind and compassionate. He's so vivacious. He's so easy to love.

And that right there might be the most terrifying thought he's ever had. It's also what makes him finally decide that he absolutely cannot handle this on his own, and he makes the executive decision to call in reinforcements. He needs someone who knows about stuff like this, about feelings and relationships. Someone smart and thoughtful and warm-hearted.

Max looks as uncomfortable being in Mike's room as he is having her there. This is weird. He shouldn't have done this. This was a mistake.

"So, are you gonna tell me what you need help with, or are you just gonna make me sit here in silence?" Max says from his desk chair, raising an eyebrow. It looks like it's judging him. This was definitely a mistake.

"I don't know," Mike answers, which is the truth. He doesn't know anything anymore.

"Okay, well," Max says, slapping her thighs as she stands. "I have homework to do, so I'm gonna go. You let me know when you actually wanna talk."

"Wait, no," Mike says, sighing. "I'll tell you. It's just hard." Max sits back down, blinking expectantly. He opens his mouth, almost ready to talk, before sighing and closing it again. She rolls her eyes, and he really doesn't blame her.

"C'mon, dude, just tell me. What's the worst that'll happen?" She smiles lightly. It makes her look impatient.

“Fuck. I don't know. It's bad.” He leans back on his bed, covering his face with his hands.

“Okay, well, why don’t you start with why you’re telling me instead of literally anyone else?” Max prompts. It’s a fair question, because the two of them really aren’t close. At best, they tolerate each other most days, and at worst, well. The Party hadn’t ever split up, but one or two fights had made them come close. Either way, Max’s relationship with Lucas had been going strong for nearly three years, which made her the most qualified. Lucas technically was, too, but judgement from Lucas was a lot scarier than judgement from Max.

“Because if you end up hating me, I'll care the least,” Mike replies honestly. Max snorts.

“A nice thing to say to someone who's taking the time out of their day to help you through your weird mid-life crisis.”

“I kissed Will,” he blurts out, sitting up. The words hang between them, so tangible he feels like he could reach out and pull them back inside of him.

Max blinks. Whatever she expected him to say, it was very clearly not that. “Oh.” She takes a few moments, looking like she's thinking hard. “Okay. And?”

“And what? I kissed Will.” What else did she need to know? He *kissed Will.*

“And what's the problem?”

“The problem is that *I kissed Will.*” He really does not understand what she's missing.

“That's not a problem, that's just a fact. So what if you kissed?” Mike stares at her, wondering if she was on an entirely different plane of existence. “Is the problem that you didn't want to?”

“What? No,” Mike says. Too quickly, judging by the way Max's expression changes.

“Oh.” She watches him for a long time, contemplating. “So the

problem is that you did want to." It's not a question this time. Mike shrugs, not meeting her eyes. "Dude. Come on. I'll help you, but you gotta give me something to work with here."

"I—I mean. Yeah." Max quirks a brow, lips shut tight, waiting for him to continue. Mike groans a little, flopping backwards and running his hands through his hair. "He said he'd never been kissed before, and he was nervous, so I offered to...I don't know, be his first kiss. So he could practice, or whatever. I don't know. It wasn't supposed to be a big deal."

"So why is it a big deal?" Max encourages, sounding a little like a therapist. He scowls at her. She lifts her hands in exasperation.

"Because I—fuck. I don't know. I just—I mean, it wasn't—it was just...it was nice," he finally manages.

Max's eyebrows are in her hairline. "Holy shit, dude. I've never seen you this messed up. You got it bad."

"Got what?" Mike says, sitting up straight. If Max knows what's wrong with him, then he can figure out how to fix it.

Max shrugs. "I mean, I don't know what, exactly, but if you're this fucking crazy over one kiss, I have a pretty good idea." Mike looks at her, and he's sure his annoyance is visible. She rolls her eyes. "Dude. You like Will."

Mike doesn't know how on earth he had thought this was a good idea, because of all the things she could have said, she picked the most ridiculous option. "No, I don't. I can't. I like girls, you know that. I'm not gay."

Max stares back. He got the feeling that she thought he was an idiot. "Okay, but you literally just told me that you liked kissing him."

"That doesn't make—I mean, just because—That's just—What do you *mean*?"

Max looks alarmed, her eyes wide. "Okay, don't die." She pointedly ignores the glare he gives her. "Let's take it step by step. You liked kissing him, right?"

Mike takes a deep breath. “Right.”

“And you want to kiss him again?”

“I mean, um. I guess? I don't fucking know.” He stands, going to pace the length of his room. “I don't know.”

“If you could kiss him right now, no consequences, no freaking out about your sexuality or whatever, would you do it?”

Mike stands in front of his dresser, refusing to face Max for this one. If he had the chance, would he kiss Will again? Would he want to feel the soft silk of Will’s hair as he runs his fingers through it, feel the sharp jut of Will’s hipbone underneath his hand, feel the quick thrum of Will’s heart against his chest as they lay together? Mike clears his throat before answering with a begrudging, “Yes.”

Max doesn’t seem to notice his heated face as he turns, because she trudges forward without hesitation. “And you like spending time with him?”

“Well, yeah,” Mike says, shrugging, “but he's my friend. Of course I do.”

“Yeah, but think about it. It's different than when you hang out with Dustin or Lucas, right?” She pauses, letting him consider it, before frowning at him. “You better say yes. Don't tell me you've been kissing my boyfriend, too.”

Mike snorts. “Trust me, I have definitely not kissed Lucas.”

“And you don't want to, right?”

“I promise you, I'm not trying to steal your man.” She looks a little like she doesn’t believe him, so he sighs and says, very plainly, “I do not want to kiss Lucas.”

“Yeah, but you do want to kiss Will. You like him. *Like him* like him.” Max sits back, smiling proudly.

“Just wanting to kiss someone doesn’t mean you *like* them. It means you’re…attracted to them,” Mike counters, frowning.

“Is that better? Does it make you feel better if you’re just *attracted* to Will instead of interested in him?”

“I mean—I just—*fuck*, I don’t know, okay? I don’t fucking know.” He slumps back onto his bed again, throwing his hands over his face. Max might have been too good a choice for this. He thinks he liked it better when he didn’t know what was going on.

They both allow the silence to settle, and it covers them like a blanket in summer, uncomfortably warm. Mike desperately wants Max to speak, but he also doesn’t want to hear any of what she has to say. He keeps his face buried in his hands.

“Hey,” she finally says, just before the quiet suffocates them. “You know it’s okay, right? No one in the Party’s gonna stop liking you. We’re all…we’re all here for you. And none of us are going to make you feel bad for it.” *Supportive* isn’t exactly a trait he associates with Max, and it doesn’t quite suit her. But it’s what he needs, and it’s enough.

“I know, it’s not that—I mean, it *is* that, but—it’s just…” Mike sighs for perhaps the thousandth time, sitting up on the edge of his bed. “I mean, I like girls. And Will’s, uh, not a girl. And it just doesn’t make sense.”

Max’s expression twists, and she turns to him with an odd look on face. “You're really caught up on that, aren't you? Who cares? Look, it doesn't matter whether he's a boy or a girl, it matters that you like him. Which you do.” Mike must not look convinced, because she sighs again and presses on. “And besides, it’s not, like, unheard of. I had a friend—uh, friend of a friend, I guess—back in California that likes both. It’s not *that* weird.”

“What?” Mike says sharply, leaning forward. “Really?”

“Yeah. She liked boys and girls. And, I mean, other people do, too. It’s a thing, apparently.”

“So, it's not...weird? I’m not a freak?” His leg is jiggling, the way it does when he’s nervous, but he can’t seem to stop it. “There’s actually other people...”

“I mean…Troy's definitely gonna call you a freak if he finds out. He’s gonna call you every name in the book if he finds out. But he does that anyway, so...” She shrugs. “But no, to answer your question, you're not the only person that likes boys and girls.”

“Holy shit,” he says, because *holy shit.* It’s like her words flipped a magic switch in his brain labeled *you’re allowed to feel this*. And just like that, everything comes rushing to the forefront of his mind, every lingering touch, every prolonged look, every time he couldn’t sleep because he was too worried about Will. Every time he thought about kissing him. Every single second of their kisses. “Holy shit. I like Will. Holy *shit.*” He rounds on Max, looking at her with frenzied eyes. “What the fuck do I do?”

“Uh, I don't know,” she says, leaning back just a bit, probably to put some space between them. “Tell him, I guess?”

“What the fuck? No! I can't tell him.” He tugs his hands roughly through his hair. “He's gonna...fuck. He'll think I'm a creep for using fucking *kissing practice* to try and hit on him or something.”

“You kind of were,” Max supplies helpfully.

“Fuck. He'll hate me.” He stands again, walking towards his dresser absentmindedly. “He's gonna fucking hate me. What kind of person gets a crush on their best friend? He gets enough people calling him queer already. *Fuck*.”

“Wait, what? You really think he's going to hate you?” she says, looking confused. “We're talking about Will, right? Our Will? Will Byers? Short, brown hair, looks at you like the entire sun shines out of your pasty ass? Dude, he's not gonna hate you.”

“If anyone at school finds out, they're gonna give him even more shit. I can't...I don't want him to go through that because I couldn't control my stupid crush.” He groans, plopping himself back onto the bed.

“Don't tell people at school?” Max says, shrugging. “Look, I don't know what to tell you. You like another guy. People are gonna be assholes about it. So I guess you gotta decide if it's worth it.”

Mike thinks for a moment before giving her a dirty look. “Who are you calling pasty?”

“What?” She blinks, a little startled. “Mike, we’ve moved past that. Focus on the important things I’m saying now.”

“Okay, but I’m not pasty. I might be pale, but you’re one to talk about pasty.”

“Wheeler?” she says, impatience visible on her face. “You done?”

“I’m just saying,” he says with a sigh, standing to walk back and forth again. “What, uh, what did you mean? *‘If it’s worth it’*.”

“I mean, you can go tell Will that you like him and then you can kiss him whenever you want. And, like, other couple stuff, I guess. And you gotta decide if that's worth the shit that people are gonna give you.”

“Okay, but just because I tell Will I like him doesn't mean—I mean...it doesn't mean that—fuck.” He laces his fingers together and places his hands behind his head, leaning back and blowing out a deep breath. After a few beats, he turns back towards his bed. Max frowns as he passes. “Is Will even gay? Or like both, or whatever? How do we know Will doesn’t like girls? I mean, the whole reason we were…practicing was so that he could kiss a girl. He’s probably been acting so weird because he was, I don’t know, disgusted or whatever.”

“Uh, hello, Wheeler?” She waves a condescending hand in front of his face, which he promptly bats away. “Do you not remember the whole 'thinks the sun shines out of your pasty, flat ass' part?”

“Stop talking about my ass—”

“The point is, dumbass, Will's had the biggest, most obvious crush on you for as long as I've known him, at least.”

“What?” he says, head whipping around to face her. “Seriously? Did he tell you that? How do you know?”

“No, he didn't tell me.” Max says, frowning at him. “I just have eyes.”

“If he didn't tell you, you don't know for sure. What if you're wrong? I don't want him to hate me.”

“I cannot believe people think you're the smart one of the group,” she says, and does not acknowledge his following scowl. “You could literally stab that kid and he'd probably apologize for ruining your knife.”

“Okay, but what if—”

“Look, maybe I’m wrong and he doesn’t like you. I don’t know for sure. But even if he doesn’t, he’s not disgusted by you, and he definitely doesn’t hate you. I will honestly be shocked if there's *anything* you could do to make Byers hate you.”

“Okay, but *what if*—”

“Mike! Please calm down, you're starting to stress me out.” Mike pauses, settling on a light glower in her direction instead. If she notices, she does not react to it. “Listen, he’s not gonna be mad, no matter what happens. And if I'm wrong about that, which I'm not, I will snap my board in half and never skate again.”

He narrows his eyes at her accusingly. “You would never do that.”

“You're absolutely right, but that's not the point, because I'm not wrong,” Max says, waving her hand dismissively. “Look, you can do whatever you want, I honestly don't care. But you and Will love each other a lot. Ah—!” she snaps, holding up a finger when Mike opens his mouth to argue. “Maybe not romantically, or whatever. I don’t care how you want to phrase it. But the two of you care about each other, and your friendship is important to both of you. If you just wanna be friends again, all you have to do is talk to him. It’s gonna work out, okay?”

Mike is silent for a long time. “If you say so.”

“I do,” she says simply. “And now that we’ve got that settled, I've got some homework that I actually need to do, so...you good?”

“Yeah, I'm good.” Max stands, gathering her backpack from the floor. “If you're wrong, though,” Mike says as she makes her way to leave,

“I'm gonna break your board myself.”

She gives him a bright smile that sends a chill down his spine. “I will personally kill you with my bare hands, Wheeler.”

He smirks, leaning back on his hands as she exits. “Hey, Max,” he calls just as her hair flips its way out of his door. She peers her head back in, frowning. “I just wanted to say, uh…thanks. I mean it.”

Max smiles again, and for the first time since she entered his room, it looks genuine. “No problem, Mike,” she says, adjusting her backpack on her shoulders. “Just don’t fuck up.”

It's been three days since his conversation with Max. Mike knows three days is sort of a long time, but he's also just coming to terms with the fact that he likes boys. Or, one boy, at least. It's confusing. He feels like he's earned some time to work through it.

And really, he's not ready to be here at all. He was planning on taking a lot more time to think, or to avoid whatever was happening, or whatever he was really doing. He would've, too, except for the fact that Lucas said something at lunch that made the whole table explode with laughter, and all Mike could do was stare at the way Will's entire face lit up. Mike's been spending a lot of time staring at Will these days, so that's nothing new. But when Will caught his eye, the smile fell right from his face, and he shrunk back in his seat, and he didn't look at Mike again for the rest of lunch.

He’s past the point of pretending it doesn’t sting.

Because even if Will doesn’t like him back, they’re still best friends. Will is still the person he wants to talk to at the end of the day. He wants to be able to tell Will everything, he wants Will to tell him everything, he wants to both of them to know everything, about each other, about themselves, about the world. He wants to smile with him on the good days, because they’re a reminder of everything they’ve fought for. He wants to lay with him on the bad days, because he has them too, because things are tough sometimes but they’ll always have each other to count on. He wants to know that eleven years of friendship won’t be lost over nothing, over something as stupid as a

kiss when they've fought off demons together. He wants Will to be happy. He wants to be the one making Will happy, and if Will only wants him as a friend, that's okay, because Mike wants Will to be his friend more than anything, more than he did when he was five and scared and alone on a playground.

He's going to fix this.

He knocks on the door, louder than necessary, just in case Will has his stereo going. He knows Joyce is working this time of day, so Will is home alone, which he figures is better than trying to have a hushed conversation in his bedroom so his mother won't overhear.

There's no answer. He knocks again, a little louder this time. When he stops, he hears the slight sounds of someone shuffling around inside. He glances towards the window and sees the curtains fluttering back into place, suspiciously similar to if someone had just been peering out of them. Mike frowns and takes another moment before knocking a third time.

The movement from inside stops, and he only waits a few heartbeats before pounding on the door yet again. "Will," he calls, giving it one last try. "It's me. C'mon, open up. Please?"

There's a long pause, but eventually he hears the sounds of movement again. There's a click of a lock, then the door opens to reveal Will, already changed from his school clothes into an oversized sweatshirt. It makes him look small.

"Hi," Mike says. It sounds more anxious than he means it to, which definitely has nothing to do with the way he's currently staring at Will.

"Hi," Will says back in an attempt at being casual, as though he hadn't just ignored the first three times Mike knocked.

"Can I come in?"

Will nods, stepping aside to allow him in the door and closing it behind him. "What's up?" Mike can hear the nerves in his voice. He hates knowing that he scares Will.

“I wanna talk.”

Will waits a half second too long before nodding stiffly, motioning towards the couch. Mike goes to sit, but Will turns to the kitchen instead, disappearing for a short time. He comes back a minute later with two glasses, one with water for himself and another with apple juice for Mike, which is exactly what he would have requested if Will had asked. But he didn’t need to.

His heart twinges painfully as he takes the cup from Will’s hand.

“So,” Will says, taking a seat next to him, further away than he normally would. Mike pretends he doesn’t notice. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Are we okay?” comes out of his mouth before he can even think about stopping it. “Never mind, that was a stupid question. We’re not, obviously. Everything's been weird since, uh, since we kissed. And I don't know how to fix it, but I hate this. And I just...I just want to fix it. I don't want you to be mad at me anymore.”

“I'm not mad at you.” Mike’s disbelief must show on his face, because Will rolls his eyes. “I'm not! I told you I wasn't mad. I wasn't lying. You didn't do anything wrong.”

“Okay, well, I'm sorry for—”

“You didn't *do* anything, Mike. You don't have to apologize.” Which was nice of Will to say, but Mike’s entire plan sort of hinged on apologizing, so that wasn’t going to work. Besides, getting feelings for his best friend and ruining everything warranted an apology in his book, at least.

“Can I apologize anyway?” he asks, fidgeting with his hands. “It's gonna make me feel better.”

“Fine, but I'm not gonna accept it,” Will says, his mouth pressed in a stubborn line.

Mike gives him a flat, pointed look that probably undermines the sincerity of his words, setting his cup on the end table beside him. “Well, anyway, I'm sorry for making things weird. I should've just not

been an idiot and I shouldn't have taken your first kiss and I'm sorry I pressured you into it."

Will places his drink down as well, crosses him arms, and sniffs a little. "Well, apology not accepted. You didn't pressure me, Mike. It's *fine*."

"Then why is everything weird?! If you're not mad at me and I didn't do anything wrong, and I'm not mad at you and you didn't do anything wrong, then things should be normal!" Having a stupid crush on Will shouldn't change things. It *shouldn't*. He's not a baby, he can handle someone not liking him back, as long as it means he gets to keep his best friend. He's not about to lose Will again, not after everything, not for another moment.

"I don't know. I guess kissing just changes things? I don't have a lot of experience with this, so. I don't know," Will says with a shrug. He does not meet Mike's eyes the next time he speaks. "Didn't things change for you, when you and El kissed?"

"Well, yeah," Mike says, "but that was different, because we both liked each other."

"Oh." Will's face turns blank, and he sinks back into the sofa. "Right."

"Yeah." And for a moment, he thinks he's just gonna say it. It's not working, things aren't getting better, so maybe just admitting to it will fix things. *Hey, Will, it's all my fucking fault! I'm just a dumbass who can't be a normal friend! I just had to go and get a stupid crush on you! Oops! Sorry! Can you even forgive me? Can we fix this?*

He almost does it, too. Except he can't stop thinking about what Max said and he can't stop hoping that maybe there's a chance and he just can't stop himself when he opens his mouth and, "Will, do you like me?" comes out instead.

"What? What are you—" Will's voice breaks, high and heart wrenching. Mike knows he should say something, that he definitely should've phrased his question better, but it's not like his brain has been functioning for the last two weeks, so why would it start now? Instead he just stares, because that's all he's capable of doing

anymore, while Will's breath picks up as he struggles to figure out what to say. “Look, I'm sorry, okay?” And Mike knows that voice is his about-to-cry voice, because Will isn’t going to lie to him, and he’s not going to pretend he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Will is going to be honest with him, even when Mike couldn’t do it himself. With a pang, he reaches for Will's elbows. Will flinches away. “I'm just—I'm sorry. I know it's—it's gross and wrong and I should've just said no, I shouldn't have let you kiss me, I'm sorry. I'll stop, I promise, okay? I promise I'll stop, I just—I'm sorry, I'm *sorry*—”

“Hey, Will.” He reaches for Will again, but he shifts back, looking overwhelmingly guilty. “Will.” He stops struggling enough to let Mike hold onto his forearms, choosing instead to stare steadfastly at his lap. “I told you I wasn't mad, remember? I didn't lie. Don't apologize.”

“Yeah, but I'm the reason it's weird. I'm the reason everything's messed up. I'm”—he heaves a great breath, glancing up to meet his eyes— “I'm just sorry.”

“*Stop*,” Mike says insistently, gripping tighter, “apologizing when you haven't done anything wrong.”

Will blushes, gaze returning to his fidgeting hands in front of him. He's silent for a long moment, before he finally says, “Can I apologize anyway? It'll make me feel better.” He doesn't look up, but Mike catches the small, barely-there smile playing on his lips. It's an olive branch, meant to heal, meant to prove that Will would do anything to save their friendship, even if it meant sacrificing his own feelings.

He is so easy to love.

Mike doesn't know how he never saw it before, or how it took a make out session, several weeks, and a come to Jesus talk with Max to figure it out. Maybe he's really as oblivious as she says. Or maybe he's known since he was a lonely kindergartener that Will belonged in his life. He's never noticed these feelings because there's nothing new about them at all. They’ve always been there. He’s always loved Will, maybe not romantically, but still just as strongly.

“Will,” he says, and he can't stop smiling. This should probably be

serious or something, he thinks, but *fuck*, he's just so happy. Because this is right, because this is how it's supposed to be, because *holy shit Will likes him back.* “Will, look at me.”

The grin on his face is stupidly big at this point, and he knows he probably looks like an idiot, but he doesn't care. Will finally lifts his head, and Mike watches his face flit through a myriad of emotions—*hurt, guilt, confusion, trepidation*—before he finally lifts the corner of his mouth in a small, tentative smile. “What?” he asks, and Mike catches the flicker of something else on his face. *Hope*.

“You know why I've been weird this whole time?” He's not nervous anymore, and he lets the words fly from his mouth like birds from a cage, like they've been begging for freedom. “I thought you didn't like me. I thought I'd messed up and freaked you out when I asked you to kiss me.”

“What do you—?” he pauses, frowning, looking at Mike like he doesn't quite know what he’s saying. Or like he doesn’t quite believe it.

He's been avoiding it, trying to make Will understand without actually saying it out loud. But he's not nervous anymore, he refuses to be, so he takes a deep breath and takes the plunge. “When I asked you to kiss me, it wasn’t just—I asked because I wanted to. I wanted to kiss you.”

Will's expression is controlled, meant to be unreadable. Mike can see right through it. “Why?”

“Because I like you,” he breathes, like it's the simplest thing in the world. “And I'd wanted to kiss you for a while, but I didn't know how, and I just...I don't know. I just like you so much.” And now he's nervous again, blushing hotly, but Will needed to hear it, and he needed to say it, and he still can't get rid of his stupid smile.

He's expecting fireworks, or for birds to start singing, or maybe for *Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now* to start playing softly in the background. Everything's working out, it's going right, it's how it's supposed to be.

Will's frowning at him. He takes a sharp breath but stops himself, looking away. “Okay, look,” he finally manages, his voice a little frantic. “I know you wouldn't do this, but I have to ask. This isn't a joke, right? Because if it is, it's *really* not—”

“What? No!” Mike looks at him, incredulous. “Of course not.”

“And you're not just saying this stuff, right?” he continues, almost as though he hadn’t heard Mike. “You're not just trying to fix our friendship or whatever? 'Cause...because that's just gonna make it worse in the long run. You can't just *say* all that stuff if you don't really—”

“Hey,” he says, grabbing Will's head in his hands. He turns his face slowly to look at him and does his best to make his voice low. Quiet. Comforting. “I'm not joking. And I'm not just saying stuff. It took me a while to come to terms with it, I guess. I had a whole discussion with Max, and like, at least eight different freak outs. It’s been a crazy time. But listen.” He runs a thumb over Will's cheekbone, looks him directly in the eyes, and states plainly, “I like you. Okay?”

“Okay,” Will answers automatically, but he doesn't look quite convinced, and Mike lets his hands fall from his face. He blinks, frowning just the slightest, and asks, “Really?”

Mike lets out a breathy laugh. “Really.”

Will nods, clearly thinking hard. After a moment, he looks back at Mike. “*Really*?”

“*Yes*, really,” Mike says, rolling his eyes with an exasperated smile.

“Then why didn't you lead with that?!” Will snaps, shoving Mike's shoulder, but he's grinning wider than Mike's seen in months. “You made *me* go first? Are you kidding? You're the worst.” Mike reaches for him, but he wiggles out of his hands, glowering. It’d be a lot more intimidating if it wasn’t punctured by the cutest smile in the world.

“Hey, I didn't even know I liked guys until three days ago!” Mike says, raising his hands in defense. “I've been dealing with a lot.”

“Yeah, I have a lot of questions about all that, actually.”

“Yeah, well, I still have about zero answers, so.” Mike shrugs.

It’s a conversation they’re going to have eventually, and they both know it. There’s a lot to discuss, boundaries and backstories and the *so what are we?* talk, but right now they’re just giddy in the moment and wrapped in the possibility of each other. Besides, Will has a glint in his eye, and he raises one eyebrow. “Well, turns out I was right about one thing.”

“What's that?” Mike says.

“You kissed me before you knew you liked guys?”

“Yeah?” he says, taken aback. “Uh, I mean, like, I knew that, uh…I don’t know, I wanted to kiss you, I just didn't realize—” He stops, because Will is leaning forward, grinning wickedly. It's possibly the most adorable thing in existence. “What?”

“Like I said,” he says lightly, shrugging one shoulder. “Desperate.”

Mike's jaw drops, and he stares at Will like he’s never seen him before. Will tilts his head back and laughs until Mike tackles him gracelessly into the sofa. “What was that, Byers?” he says, reaching for a pillow and smothering him with it.

“Mike!” Will shouts, muffled and giggly. “Stop it! You are the *worst*.” He manages to wrestle the pillow away from him, tossing it clear across the room.

Devoid of his weapon, Mike chooses to plop down on top of him instead, resting his chin on Will’s chest and staring up at him. “Yeah, I am,” he says. “But you like me anyway.”

Will looks away and lets out an embarrassed laugh, but the blush that dusts his cheeks is the prettiest thing Mike’s ever seen, and he’s having a hard time focusing on anything else.

“Hey,” Mike says. He’s got that stupid grin on his face again, but he doesn’t even try to hide it.

“Hi,” Will says back, soft and shy.

“You know, we got interrupted pretty early the other day.” He props himself up on his elbows, moving up so they’re face to face.

“Yeah?” Will asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah.” He runs his thumb through the hair by Will’s neck, nodding. “There’s a lot of stuff I didn’t get to teach you.”

Will snorts, rolling his eyes, but he’s blushing even deeper than before. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Mike leans in until their foreheads touch and plants a soft kiss along Will’s warm cheek. “Want to practice?”

Notes for the Chapter:

> IS THAT FLUFFY ENOUGH FOR YOU ALL
>
> thank you to everyone who commented and left kudos on the first part, and thank you everyone for reading the second! you can find me on tumblr at byeler